

Art & Religion

Religion and Art.

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For our present purposes religion is man's attitude towards the Universe, and by the Universe we mean the entire Universe, physical, moral and spiritual. When man explores and measures the physical facts of the Universe he is scientific, when he considers his personal relationship to the entire Universe he is religious.

So all religions contain, generally quite explicitly, an explanation of the beginning, end and purpose of the Universe and a definition of each man's position and responsibilities in it.

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For In itself religion is an emotional attitude. It is founded upon an interpretation of the Universe as being governed or regulated in such and such a manner but religion is man's personal relation to this scheme and is therefore emotional. It is for this reason that faith is always so important in religion, for faith is emotional belief, a belief very necessary for us and quite distinct from scientific & intellectual conviction.

Now art is the designed expression of emotion; it is the manner in which we convey emotion from one person to another. An artist is a person whose emotions are naturally powerful and by education brought under control. He experiences an emotion - by looking at some object or hearing some sound or through some thought. He realises his emotion in some exterior form - that is - he paints a picture, writes a poem or otherwise materialises the emotion. It can now be seen and experienced by other people and the chain from artist through the work of art to the spectator is complete.

Art can use any emotion, but, as no one is going to look at a disagreeable object, art usually uses the pleasurable emotion which we call beauty.

The religious emotions ~~are~~ are very strong, at times they are almost the strongest in man's life, it is therefore only

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Man has never been able to grasp the entire Universe and accordingly his interpretations have always been founded upon his experience at the time. So the wandering early Hebrew tribes conceived the Universe as governed by tribal deities who watched over each tribe in its wanderings. To abandon ~~such~~ ones own god and take up with another was the act of a traitor. The Mahomedan ~~reg~~ modelled his god upon the oriental despot. The kindly but just father of his people whose word is law ~~and~~ ^{but} who will permit of no pretender to his throne. The Christianity of Medieval Europe established a Court of Heaven strictly modelled upon the ~~the~~ Feudal system of its day with ministers of justice, a standing army and an enemy on the other side of the border against whom faithful subjects must be protected. It is noteworthy that Buddha - who taught that his life is an illusion and that he escape into reality must be through self annihilation was ~~he~~ a prince, the son of a despot, who might well ~~be~~ know the futility of earthly greatness and the need for escape.

Today we are beginning to wonder whether the Universe is within our comprehension and with that wonder comes a very humble attitude towards religion. We are not too sure about it - not too confident that our theories of the Universe necessarily cover everything but we are sure of this - Religion must include our emotion as well as our knowledge.

object upon which to centre their emotions whilst any danger of idolatry can easily be warded off by careful teaching. Such religions employ the visual arts freely and in them art and religion have been very closely linked; art supplying the concrete expression of the religious emotion.

Bison

The oldest paintings we know are the paintings executed by primitive + prehistoric man in the caves of Spain. These are painted in the darkest recesses of the caves and represent bisons and other animals in profile, very realistically drawn and coloured.

There is little doubt about their purpose. These early men lived by hunting and many bisons meant a happy life. Now, they reasoned, if there are bisons in the caves there will be bisons in the land. So they painted and modelled the best bisons they could and shut them up in the caves so as to ensure plenty of bisons in the land. Of course these painted bisons must be as like the real ones as possible and so rose this realistic and, in many ways, beautiful art. It was also a very useful art from their point of view. The artist even painted arrows sticking in the bisons so that they should be easily shot when hunted.

Reindeer
& Salmon

Similarly they drew pictures of animals, always of useful food animals, such as reindeer and salmon, on their ^{weapons} implements so that the weapons might find the animals easily. A similar feeling causes some African tribes to make their arrows in the form of conventional crocodiles so that they will bite well or causes the Chinese to paint eyes on the bows of their ships so that they can see their way.

We ourselves until recently used figureheads on our ships to act as guides across the sea.

But in all this art there is something further than utility. In the cave paintings, crowded together overlapping one another, occupying every inch of suitable

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space, we can see something of the artistic fury of the painter. No doubt he painted his bisons because it was a good thing for the community to do so; but he also painted because he wanted to paint. Painting gave him that sense of power which comes to the artist and to him alone, the sense of being more than a man, of being a creator. The artist here feels himself to be in some degree the master of his universe, and this is a deeply religious attitude. The world may be regarded as a work of art made by God, if so there is no need to ask why it was made - for the artist never asks why he paints. He only knows that he must do so from the very nature of his being.

Now, coming to historic times, the Ancient Egyptians believed that one of man's three souls remained on earth, and they also believed that his future life depended, to some degree upon the preservation of his body. They therefore preserved the body carefully by mummification and, to supply the needs of the ghost, or earth soul, they painted on the walls all the scenes of a happy earth life. So the dead man's soul could have houses and servants, could hunt wild fowl through the marshes or feast with his friends. As was the case with the prehistoric Cro-Magnons, such paintings must of course be as lifelike as possible and within its conventions Egyptian art is one of the most realistic in the world. It represents everything as it really is - and necessarily as it "looks like" but as it is. So it omits mere shadows or high lights, accidental effects of foreshortening or perspective and concentrates upon the actual material thing. Here again religion required and produced a great decorative art, although an art rather lacking in idealism or ^{the} deeper emotions. The Egyptians were, so far as we know, a very simple-minded happy people. and they have a simple happy art.

Egyptian Pigs

1. Hunting

2. ~~House scene~~

It is interesting to find that certain artistic symbols which originated in these early civilizations have remained with us to this day.

Winged Priest
eyes.

Here, for instance, are the seals of Pharaoh, and his queen guarded by attendant priestesses. As symbols of spiritual quality the priestesses have artificial wings attached to their arms with which they guard and shelter the divine names. This idea of the guardian angels persisted in art. We find them in the two ~~wooden~~ cherubs, carved in wood, which stood with outstretched wings on either side of the ark in Solomon's temple, we find them in the Italian Renaissance, now devoid of Gothic angels guarding coats of arms and, now quite devoid of any religious meaning, as amorini, still guarding the personal device - now a coat of arms - of the Duke of Urbino.

Craigmillar
Arms

Urbino
mantelpiece

Perseus
tree -

In the art of Ancient Babylon we find these winged priests making offerings to a sacred tree which, in return, will grant plenty and fertility to the people. Today we no longer worship a tree - yet once a year we set up and decorate a tree which gives us presents at Christmas - a

But - who is Father Christmas?

5A.

St Nicholas of Myra, as we know, rescued the three children from the pickle tub, and so became the patron saint of Children. So, as Christmas was naturally a great children's feast, he became identified with the old gentleman with the long beard who drives his team of reindeer across the sky. And this old gentleman is ~~neither more~~ no other than Odin, the sky god, father of the gods, whose festival was Yule.

So quite a number of kind fathers today dress up as the old Norse Odin, assuming an art form whose meaning they do not suspect.

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The ancient Greek religion seems to have been a compound of two older forms at least. On one hand we have a worship of the powers of nature. Zeus - the sky, Apollo the sun and so on. On the other hand appears the worship of divine animals. Athena is the owl, Demeter, the earth mother, is also at times a horse. Artemis appears as a bear. Apollo as a mouse.

But the Greeks disliked mystery - they disliked monstrosity and they had a tendency to personify

"Etruscan"
Athena

everything. They sought always to give a clear and defined form to even the most abstract thought. So Athena was not an owl-headed woman as the Egyptians would have made her, or a woman headed owl - but was a divine woman representing the wisdom of God.

So their artists transformed the old powers of nature or divine animals into divine men and women.

Zeus.

The all-seeing, all-protecting sky became Zeus with his thunderbolt. And no doubt to many a simple Greek these artistic representations became themselves divine.

He could pray to a statue of Athena believing Athena to be a divine woman who lived on Olympus.

To the educated Athenian no doubt the statue ~~of~~ was but a human reminder of a divine ideal, yet even he probably thought of Zeus as a majestic and kindly old man, very like the statue by Pheidias.

Zeus

Amongst other, more symbolically minded people, the artistic representation assumes a more symbolic and less realistic form. Siva the destroyer shows his many arms symbols of his many functions and powers. The simple peasant may think of Siva as actually a person with all these arms, the educated Hindu regards the many arms, and indeed the god himself, as a symbol of the destroying power of nature which yet is the necessity of recreation. Yet can he utterly free himself from the feeling that the figure does represent a real person or that it has some inherent sanctity. If he is really educated he probably can. It is in this way that art is produced - made from religion and that it in turn remakes religion.

Our concrete visions of religious ideas are I think all made by artists, and most people are not really happy without some concrete visions.

Siva

Ellora Cave.

Vr. Bhudra.

VIII c

Ellora
Goddess.
Dancing.

Art of dancing. once religious now lost to religion

As was inevitable Christianity borrowed many artistic motives and forms of representation from the older religions, changing and adapting them to suit the new requirements. In the early Christian paintings, for instance, we have representations of Christ as the good shepherd which are artistically indistinguishable from the older Greek representations of Hermes as a shepherd. So artistically God the Father is the Greek Zeus, the Madonna and Child is the Egyptian Isis and Horus. The artists used the older convention with a new meaning, yet these old conventions must have carried with them much of the emotion which had been attached to the old gods.

Some of them certainly got a great deal changed. Poor old Pan, for instance, the goatherd god who cared for the shepherds and their flocks, the primitive goat man, became Satan himself. For that is how ~~Satan~~ the devil got his cloven hoofs.

To take a less painful example, if you could show to an ancient Greek Murellos well known painting of the Immaculate Conception he would recognize it at once. This lady standing on the crescent moon is Astarte, Queen of heaven, standing on her heaven-coat, the great mother of creation.

The commonest inquiry in front of a picture today is in my experience, "What is that supposed to represent?" or more kindly "What does that represent?" To the average person a picture represents something as nature and is of value as it is like its subject. Yet art is only incidentally representative. The great arts of Music and Architecture are not representative at all. Painting and Sculpture use representation as a means of conveying emotion and if the representation interferes with the emotion, it is the representation which must be sacrificed.

Here is an English Madonna and Child of the XIII century from ~~Chichester~~ Chichester Cathedral. I do not

Good Shepherd
from Calacambis.

Hermes. Cretan
with ram.

Man with Calf.

Isis + Horus
note moon
crescent

Murellos
Imm. Conc.

Chichester
~~Chichester~~
Madonna.

Suppose for a minute that the painter here thought that he was actually representing a real personage although he undoubtedly regarded Our Lady as a personage with a real existence. But in his picture he was evoking the emotions which in the middle ages clustered round Our Lady, the very deep emotions with which men regard mothers and young children. And here he has presented these emotions with a power which is all the greater in that the representation is not too realistic. The emotional quality of this tinted drawing is much greater than that of Murillo's madonna and so it is greater art. It is this intensity of feeling which makes Medieval art so great.

Madonna + Child

Quite a number of ideas in religion owe their survival to the artist. We always think, for instance, of the ox and the ass as present at the birth of Our Lord. They appear in almost all pictures of the Nativity, yet you will search the Gospels in vain for any reference to them. They ~~seem~~ are taken from the Apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. (Birth in Cave).

Nativity
Sognovelli
in Cave.

Adoration of M.

Da Fabriano
Florence.
Nde Crowl.

Similarly we all know of the three kings who bore presents to Our Lord. ^{Caspar, Melchior, & Balthazar} The Gospel of St. Matthew mentions three wise men from the east who saw a new star signifying the birth of a king to the Jews. This is based upon the general belief that each person has a star which appears at his birth and by whose ~~impulsion~~ and movements his future may be ~~not~~ foretold. The wise men were astrologers.

I have been unable to trace the origin of the three kings, but in the hands of the artist they became the royal representatives of the white, yellow & black races paying tribute to the saviour of mankind.

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In the middle ages the ordinary man, who was not a cleric, could not read. The effect therefore of the artistic representation was all the more powerful upon him. So we find a great deal of didactic

Volaterra
Door.

In the city gates of ancient Etruria we find another religious idea which was destined to survive into Christian times. Human strength might be insufficient to guard the gates so, on the crown and at each side of the arch the Etruscans set heads of the gods who thus watched and guarded the city.

Angers Cath
Door

We find the same idea in the great Gothic Cathedrals of Europe. Here, for instance, in the door of Angers Cathedral our Lord sits above the door, flanked by the four evangelists, to guard from evil influences the entrance to his sanctuary.

Bourges
Cath. Portal

In Bourges we see a similar figure of our Lord, set upon the central pillar of the door. It is a little hard to say how much of this was deliberate and conscious, how much the following of a tradition which was felt to be beautiful.

But have you ever seen a horseshoe hung up over a door for luck. How many people who do so realize that they are setting above their doors, to guard the house from evil, the crescent of Astarte, the world mother. And it must be set points upwards or the luck will spell out.

St Famille

Here is a little village Church of Quebec. On its steeple is the Christian sign of the Cross - on the cross is the weather cock. But why do we place a cock upon our building. Some will tell you it is the Gallic Cock - but it is used in many countries besides France. Some will tell you it is St Peter's cock - but why put that very incidental ^{bird} animal in so important a place. This cock is older than all these for it is the god Tyr, in his animal form, the god who controls the lightning flash placed here to protect the house. It is very hard to kill an old, and useful god.

Judgement.
S Thomas
Canterbury

religious art. ~~The~~ Lord in judgement was displayed over the Chancel arch. on his right hand the good rise joyfully from their graves on his left the wicked are dragged down to a very realistic mouth of hell by demons. There can be no doubt that such representations did tend towards the materialisation of religion. Tho they were the product of materialistic ideas themselves.

With the revival of learning in the XV century a change comes over both art and religion. They tend to become intellectual and they tend to separate. Art begins to show pride in knowledge, pride in correct drawing, foreshortening, perspective and archaeological correctness. ~~That~~ that these things are bad in themselves; they are only bad when they obscure the real purpose and strength of art. When we begin to ask whether the costumes of a picture are correct for its period, whether the scenery really represents the place where the action took place, we are asking unnecessary questions. When we begin to complain of anachronisms we are complaining of matters which are quite apart from the purpose of the picture.

~~Sponsaro~~

Pinturicchio
Return of Ulysses.

In ~~Raphael's~~ ^{Pinturicchio's} ~~Sponsaro~~ ^{Return of Ulysses} the actors are all in the contemporary medieval dress of Italy and the ~~temple~~ ^{ship} in the background is an ~~Italian~~ ^{medieval} ~~building~~ ^{Gallean} of the ~~XIV~~ ^{XV} century. Why not? This is not an archaeological representation of a past event, it is a picture dealing with the emotions of XV century Italy.

Modern Italian
Fresco.
Pal Madonna

~~With~~ this idea that pictures should be correct ~~for~~ representations of historic events grew very slowly and did not reach its height until the XIX century when painters actually went to Palestine in order to get correct backgrounds for religious pictures. It is linked up with the religious idea that religion depends upon an accurate knowledge⁶ and an equally accurate belief in certain historic events.

These ideas both religious and artistic are of course derived from science. which was making great strides at this time and was affecting all thought very deeply. In Science accurate knowledge is of course essential. but this application of scientific principles to religion and art produced deplorable results in religious art. It turned into that sentimental prettiness which characterises most religious art of today. It has been deprived of all its strong emotions.

This process began with the renaissance although the religious art of the early renaissance is strong and good. ~~The seeds of decay are~~ But after the XVI century it is rare to find a religious picture which can rouse in us any feelings save admiration for the skill and knowledge of the painter, or pleasure in pleasant composition and colour. The great art of the XVIII and XIX century has abandoned religion. Only in the purely abstract arts of architecture and music is there any alliance - religious painting + sculpture are as poor as religious poetry and the greatest art of today is quite apart from organised religion.

For art has discovered emotions which are not included within the view of the churches. It has discovered the joy of bright colour of delicate pattern of beautiful line and of simple human life. It has discovered the beauty of nature, both human nature and external nature. ~~Upon these things, ignored by organised religion, art & modern art has founded itself.~~ These things are ignored by organised religion and upon them modern art has founded itself.

Constable.

In the end of the XVIII century Constable is painting landscape from Nature and so he taught men to see beauty in natural landscape. Turner produces his brilliant dreams of light and atmosphere, and

Turner

straightway every man begins to see that a sunset is beautiful. Until the artist saw beauty in nature there was no beauty there. for beauty is not a quality of nature it is a value which we give to nature. If you today can take pleasure in the autumn tints of the woods it is because the artist has shown you those values in nature. The artist does not perceive beauty so much as he actually creates it.

Blake
Ancient of Days

Crucifixion

In the beginnings of the XIX Century we find William Blake in London creating beauty of a deeply religious character. But the churches had no place for his rich imaginings ^{He was alleged to be unlearned & delirious man with many grave} if they were concentrating upon morality. Yet it is an old doctrine that good works are of no avail without grace.

How many people today are there who think of the artist as a man engaged in representing things and of the churches as institutions engaged in enforcing morals. So the artist has nothing to do with religion indeed, being he is popularly regarded as probably both irreligious and immoral. The Church on the other hand is a policeman ready to put us in jail if we do not behave. No wonder if many men avoid both and so grope through life with ~~un~~ untramed and unrestrained emotions. This is one of the very serious problems of today.

Religion is a man's attitude towards the Universe. The irreligious man is he who has never considered his relation to the universe. The man who observes the moral code of his day, who behaves kindly to his neighbours who accepts the dogmas of his church without ever considering any of them may be a good man but he cannot by any stretch of words be considered a religious man.

The artist in so far as he is impelled to consider his emotional reactions to Nature, his feeling of beauty, in so far as he is tending towards a religious attitude.

I do not say that this attitude is necessarily deeply religious, but it is of the nature of religion. It is a revelation of the Universe to man.

Science tells us how far away the stars are, even what they are made of. The artist tells us that the starlight sky is beautiful and so reveals a universe which science does not profess to enter. - the universe of human emotions and values. This is quite a real universe, Blake thought it the only real universe, and it is certainly the universe in which each one of us lives and acts. We do not live in the physical universe of science, we live in the emotional universe of our own sensations.

The fine arts are powerful instruments for the revelation of this universe, how then can religion ignore art and remain anything but crippled. And indeed the divorce between art and religion has, to my mind, been very injurious to both. It has deprived art of some of its finest emotions, it has made religion a mere code of morality. ~~For the Kingdom of God is not something outside us, to be learned - it is something within us to be experienced.~~ Until religion can recapture art it will, to my mind, fail to be true religion.

To quote a modern poet.

" All passes, art alone
Enduring stays with us
The corn outlasts the throne
The bust Tiberius

And I have tried to show you today how many old religious ideas have been preserved in art and how the most fundamental and simplest religious ideas have always found expression and often preservation in the creations of the artist.